



CARRIE RYAN

THE FOREST
OF HANDS
AND TEETH

Chapter Sample

THE DEBUT NOVEL BY CARRIE RYAN

WATCH THE FOREST.
STAY WITHIN THE FENCES.
DON'T FALL IN LOVE.



Art © 2009 by Jonathan Barkat.



For more details, visit SupernaturalRomanceBooks.com

Keep reading for a sneak peek ...

▼ I ▼

My mother used to tell me about the ocean. She said there was a place where there was nothing but water as far as you could see and that it was always moving, rushing toward you and then away. She once showed me a picture that she said was my great-great-great-grandmother standing in the ocean as a child. It has been years since, and the picture was lost to fire long ago, but I remember it, faded and worn. A little girl surrounded by nothingness.

In my mother's stories, passed down from her many-greats-grandmother, the ocean sounded like the wind through the trees and men used to ride the water. Once, when I was older and our village was suffering through a drought, I asked my mother why, if so much water existed, were there years when our own streams ran almost dry? She told me that the ocean was not for drinking—that the water was filled with salt.

That is when I stopped believing her about the ocean. How could there be so much salt in the universe and how could God allow so much water to become useless?

But there are times when I stand at the edge of the Forest of Hands and Teeth and look out at the wilderness that stretches on forever and wonder what it would be like if it were all water. I close my eyes and listen to the wind in the trees and imagine a world of nothing but water closing over my head.

It would be a world without the Unconsecrated, a world without the Forest of Hands and Teeth.

Often, my mother stands next to me holding her hand up over her eyes to block the sun and looking out past the fences and into the trees and brush, waiting to see if her husband will come home to her.

She is the only one who believes that he has not turned—that he might come home the same man he was when he left. I gave up on my father months ago and buried the pain of losing him as deeply as possible so that I could continue with my daily life. Now I sometimes fear coming to the edge of the Forest and looking past the fence. I am afraid I will see him there with the others: tattered clothes, sagging skin, the horrible pleading moan and the fingers scraped raw from pulling at the metal fences.

That no one has seen him gives my mother hope. At night she prays to God that he has found some sort of enclave similar to our village. That somewhere in the dense Forest he has found safety. But no one else has any hope. The Sisters tell us that ours is the only village left in the world.

My brother Jed has taken to volunteering extra shifts for the Guardian patrols that monitor the fence line. I know that, like me, he thinks our father is lost to the Unconsecrated and that he hopes to find him during the patrol of the perimeter and kill him before our mother sees what her husband has become.

People in our village have gone mad from seeing their loved ones as Unconsecrated. It was a woman—a mother—horrified at the sight of her son infected during a patrol, who set herself on fire and burned half of our town. That was the fire that destroyed my family's heirlooms when I was a child, that obliterated our only ties to who we were as a people before the Return, though most were so corroded by then that they left only wisps of memories.

Jed and I watch our mother closely now and we never allow her to approach the fence line unaccompanied. At times Jed's wife Beth used to join us on these vigils until she was sent to bed rest with her first child. Now it is just us.

And then one day Beth's brother catches up with me while I am dunking our laundry in the stream that branches off the big river. For as long as I can remember Harold has been a friend of mine, one of the few in the village my age. He trades me a handful of wildflowers for my sopping sheets and we sit and watch the water flow over the rocks as he twists the sheets in complicated patterns to dry them out.

"How is your mother?" he asks me, because he is nothing if not polite.

I duck my head and wash my hands in the water. I know I should be getting back to her, that I have already taken too much time for myself today and that she is probably pacing, waiting for me. Jed is off on a long-term patrol of the perimeter, checking the strength of the fences, and my mother likes to spend her afternoons near the Forest looking for my father. I need to be there to comfort her just in case. To hold her back from the fences if she finds him. "She's still holding out hope," I say.

Harry clucks his tongue in sympathy. We both know there is little hope.

His hands seek out and cover mine under the water. I have known this was coming for months. I have seen the way he looks at me now, how his eyes have changed. How tension has crept into our friendship. We are no longer children and haven't been for years.

"Mary, I . . ." He pauses for a second. "I was hoping that you would go with me to the Harvest Celebration next weekend."

I look down at our hands in the water. I can feel my fingertips wrinkling in the cold and his skin feels soft and fleshy. I consider his

offer. The Harvest Celebration is the time in the fall when those of marrying age declare themselves to one another. It is the beginning of the courtship, the time during the short winter days when the couple determines whether they will make a suitable match. Almost always the courtship will end in spring with Brethlaw—the weeklong celebration of wedding vows and christenings. It's very rare that a courtship fails. Marriage in our village is not about love—it is about commitment.

Every year I wonder at the couples pairing up around me. At how my former childhood friends suddenly find partners, bond, prepare for the next step. Pledge themselves to one another and begin their courtships. I always assumed the same would happen to me when my time approached. That because of the sickness that wiped out so many of my peers when I was a child, it would be even more important that those of us of marrying age find a mate. So important that there wouldn't be enough girls to spare for a life with the Sisterhood.

I even hoped that perhaps I would be lucky enough to find more than just a mate, to eventually find love like my mother and father.

And yet, even though I have been one of the few eligible during the past two years, I've been left aside.

I have spent the last weeks dealing with my father's absence beyond the fences. Dealing with my mother's despair and desolation. With my own grief and mourning. Until this moment it hasn't occurred to me that I might be the last one asked to the Harvest Celebration. Or that I might be left unclaimed.

A part of me can't help but think of Harry's younger brother Travis. It is his attention I have been trying to catch throughout the summer, his friendship I have wanted to turn into something more. But he has never responded to my subtle and awkward flirtations.

As if he can read my mind Harry says, "Travis is taking

Cassandra,” and I can’t help but feel hollow and petty and angry that my best friend has accomplished what I could not. That she has Travis’s attention and I don’t.

I don’t know what to say. I think of the way the sun shifts over Travis’s face when he smiles and I look into Harry’s eyes and try to find the same shifts. They are brothers, after all, born barely a year apart. But there is nothing except the feel of his flesh on mine under the water.

Rather than answer I smile a little, relieved that at last someone has spoken for me while a part of me wonders if our lifelong friendship could ever grow to be something more during the dark winter courtship months.

Harry grins and he drops his head toward me and all I can think about is how I had never wanted Harry to be my first kiss, and then before his lips can land on mine we hear it.

The siren. It is so old and so rarely used these days that it starts out with a creak and a wheeze and then it is full-blown.

Harry’s eyes meet mine, his face now a breath away.

“Was there supposed to be a drill today?” I ask.

He shakes his head, his eyes are as wide as mine must be. His father is the head of the Guardians and he would know of any drills. I stand, ready to start sprinting back toward the village. Every inch of my skin tingles, my heart curling into a painful fist. All I can think is, Mother.

Harry grabs my arm and pulls me back. “We should stay here,” he says. “It’s safer. What if the fences are breached? We need to find a platform.” I can see the terror closing in on the irises of his eyes. His fingers dig into my wrist, almost clawing at me but I keep pulling away, pushing at his hands and body until I am free.

I scramble up the hill toward the center of our village, ignoring the winding path and choosing instead to grab at branches and vines

to help me up the steep slope. As I crest the ridge I look back to see Harry still down by the water's edge, his hands up in front of his face as if he cannot bear to see what is happening above. I see his mouth move, as if he's calling out to me, but all I can hear is the siren—the sound of it burns into my ears and echoes around me.

All my life I have trained by that siren. Before I could walk I knew the siren meant death. It meant somehow the fences had been breached and the Unconsecrated were shuffling among us. It meant grab weapons, move to the platforms and pull up the ladders—even if it necessitated leaving the living behind.

Growing up, my mother used to tell me about how in the beginning, when her own great-great-great-grandmother was a child, that siren would wail almost constantly as the village was bombarded with the Unconsecrated. But then the fences had been fortified, the Guardians had formed and time had passed with the Unconsecrated dwindling to the point that I couldn't remember a time in the past few years when that siren had wailed and it had not been a drill. I know that in my life there have been breaches but I also know that I am very good at blocking out the memories that serve me no purpose. I can fear the Unconsecrated well enough without them.

The closer I get to the edge of the village the more slowly I move. Already I can see that the platforms cradled in the trees are full; some have even pulled their ladders up. All around me is chaos. Mothers dragging children, the implements of everyday life scattered in the dirt and grass.

And then the sirens cut out, there is silence and everyone freezes. A baby resumes its wailing, a cloud passes over the sun. And I see a small group of Guardians dragging someone toward the Cathedral.

"Mother," I whisper, everything inside of me falling at once. Because somehow I just know. I know that I shouldn't have lingered

at the stream with Harry, that I shouldn't have let him hold my hand while my mother was waiting for me to accompany her to the fence.

My back is ramrod straight as I walk toward the entrance to the Cathedral, an old stone building built well before the Return. Its thick wooden door is open and my neighbors step aside as they see me draw near but no one will look me in the eyes. At the edge of the crowd I hear someone murmur, "She was too close to the fence, she allowed one to grab her."

Inside it feels as though the stone walls drain the heat of the day and the hairs on my arms stand on end. The light is dim and I see the Sisters surrounding a woman who is keening and moaning but not Unconsecrated. My mother knew to never get too close to the fences—to the Unconsecrated. Too many in our village have been lost that way. It had to have been my father she saw at the edge of the fence line and I close my eyes as the once-dampened pain of losing him slashes through my body again.

I should have been with her.

I want to curl in on myself, to hide from everything that has happened. But instead I go to my mother and kneel, putting my head in her lap and picking up one of her hands and placing it in my hair.

If I could boil my life down to its essence it would be this: my head in my mother's lap, her hands in my hair as we sit in front of the fire and she tells me stories handed down by the women of our family about life before the Return.

Now my mother's hands are sticky and I know they are covered with her blood. I shut my eyes so that I do not have to see it, so that I don't have to know the extent of the damage.

My mother is calmer, her hands instinctively tugging at my hair, letting it free from its bandana. She is rocking and saying something so low under her breath that I cannot understand her.

The Sisters let us be for now. They huddle in the corner with the

most elite of the Guardians—the Guild—and I know they are determining my mother's fate. If she was merely scratched they will monitor her even though she couldn't be infected that way. But if she was bitten and thus infected by an Unconsecrated, there are only two options. Kill her now or imprison her until she turns and then push her through the fence. In the end, if my mother is still sane, they will pose the question and let her be the judge.

Die a quick death and save her soul or go exist amongst the Unconsecrated.

We learned in our lessons that originally, right after the Return, those attacked were not allowed this choice. They were put to death almost immediately. That was back before the tide turned, back when it looked as if it would be the living who lost the battle.

But then an Infected—a widow—had come to the Sisters and begged to be allowed to join her husband in the Forest. She pleaded for the right to fulfill her marriage vows to the man she had chosen and loved. The living had already established this place—had made us safe and secure as any could be in the world of the Unconsecrated. And the widow made an excellent point: the only true thing that separates the living from the Unconsecrated is choice, free will. She wanted the choice to be with her husband. The Sisters debated against the Guardians but it is the Sisterhood's word that is always final. They decided that one more Unconsecrated would not endanger our community. And so the widow was escorted to the fence where three Guardians held her until she succumbed to the infection, and then pushed her through the gate just before she died and Returned Unconsecrated.

I can't fathom leaving an old woman to face such a fate. But such is the way of choice, I imagine.

▼ II ▼

You will stay with us now,” the Sisters tell me, “until your brother arrives.” Jed has still not returned from his rotation on the fence line. The Sisters have sent a messenger to bring him back but we won’t begin to expect him for at least a day. Our mother will probably be gone by the time he returns and he won’t have the chance to talk her out of her choice.

My mother has chosen to join the Unconsecrated. And I am quite sure that my brother will blame me for her choice. He’ll ask me why I allowed her to make this decision for herself, why I did not stand in for her and tell the Guardians to kill her.

I am not sure I will know what to tell him.

It is a complicated process, giving a living human over to the Forest of Hands and Teeth. The Guardians found out years ago that the transfer cannot be done too early because a live human cast into the Forest is nothing but food for the Unconsecrated who will tear at their flesh and eat until there is nothing left.

But at the same time it’s too dangerous to have the Infected in the village. The Guardians will not run the risk of having someone Return amongst the living and there is no certainty about when the Infected will die and Return. Everything depends on the severity of the bite: with a small, simple bite, it may take days for the infection to spread and kill, while a gruesome attack can cause someone to Return within heartbeats.

And so the Guardians have devised a complicated system of gates and pulleys that keep the infected in a sort of purgatory between the

living and the Unconsecrated. This is where my mother is now and I sit nearby, listening to her pop her jaw and clack her teeth like a cat lusting after a bird as the infection roars through her body. She is too sick to talk now, too ravaged to even understand.

A rope is tied securely around her left ankle and she picks absently at its frayed ends. We are all waiting for the inevitable but know that, judging from her wound, it will take at least a day. The turn doesn't always come quickly to the Infected.

I'm there with her on the safe side of the fence. But I am not alone because they are afraid I'm not to be trusted and that the sight of my mother as one of the Unconsecrated will cause me to do something terrible and stupid like throwing open all the gates and causing a breach. A Guardian—one of my brother's friends—has been posted to keep watch over me and my mother. He will be the one to operate the gates and he will be the one to kill me if I stray too close to her after she turns. It is the agreement that I struck with the Sisters in order to be with my mother at this time: I can be near her, but if I'm bitten then I am to be instantly put to death.

I sit with my knees pulled in tight and my arms wrapped around my shins. I can no longer feel my feet, as if blood refuses to spread so far from my heart.

I am waiting for my mother to die.

Time becomes nothing to me but a march toward my mother's Return. I wish it were a solid thing, something I could grab and shake and stop. Instead, it slips away from me, the day continually unfurling. People from the village come to console me but they don't know what to say. My brother's wife, Beth, has sent word that she prays for us, but the Sisters will not allow her to leave her bed for fear of her losing the child.

I have seen Harry standing a distance away, the harsh afternoon sun glaring from his face. I'm glad he doesn't try to approach me,

doesn't try to speak to me about this morning when he held my hand under the water and kept me from my mother.

I wonder if he still thinks that we are going to the Harvest Celebration together next week. It won't be canceled, even in light of my mother's death. As the Sisterhood always reminds us: this is the way after the Return—life must continue. It is our cycle to bear.

As the sun sets Cassandra brings me dinner and sits with me. It is a painfully beautiful sunset and the colors reflect off Cass's pale face and hair. The Guardian has kept his distance this evening, knowing that the end must be getting near. I have been alternating between hope that my mother turns quickly and is soon out of her misery and dread that she will turn too quickly and I will have lost her forever.

After a while I say, "Cass, do you believe in the ocean? Do you think it's still out there?" I'm watching the way the light plays off the tops of the trees in the Forest, the way everything in sight undulates.

"Remind me what your mother used to say about the ocean again?" she asks. Her voice is soft and kind.

"Nothing but water," I remind her. Cass has always indulged my fancies, has always listened as I repeated the stories of life before the Return that have been passed down by the women of my family. Once, her mother forbade her to speak with me because she said I was filling Cass's head with lies and blasphemy. But our village is too small for such an edict to ever take hold.

"I just don't see how there could ever be that much water in the world, Mary," she tells me. She has told me this many times before. Her eyes are bright as she turns from the sunset to look at me. "I cannot imagine a place out there without Unconsecrated." She knots her eyebrows together. "Because why would we be here rather than there?"

A tear gathers in the corner of her eye, the fading sun glinting off

it as it bulges and spills down her cheek, the image of my mother in her pen too much for her to bear. I pull Cass close and let her lay her head in my lap, her face turned away from the Forest, and stroke her hair the way my mother used to stroke my own. We watch as the lanterns come on in the village. My mother used to tell me about the times when she was a child when the Sisters would crank up the old generator on Christmas Eve. It's one of the stories I have never shared with my friend and I think about telling Cass this—about how once a year this little village used to outshine the sky.

But she is snuffling now, her weeping over, and I don't want to fill her head with more fancies tonight.

When she leaves she begs me to come with her. But I cannot. I tell her that I must be here when it happens and she raises her hands to her mouth as if the horror is too much and then she turns and runs back to the safety of the village.

I want to run with her, to escape from where I am and forget this day. But I stay, my fingers trembling and the air thick in my throat. I need to face what my mother becomes. I owe her this much after this morning, after leaving her to wander alone.

I return to staring at the fence. Watching the light slide down the sky, casting crisscrossed shadows on the ground at my feet. I blur my eyes, throwing my surroundings out of focus. The fence does not exist when I do this. As if we are all one world.



“Mother?” I whisper at daybreak. There was a new moon last night and I spent the hours in the darkness listening to the rustling of dry leaves behind the fence, my mind imagining the worst possible scenarios. Every creak I heard was the fence breaking, every scratching the Unconsecrated finally finding weakness in the metal.

Now the air is gray and moist and I crawl on my hands and

knees closer to the pen that holds my mother. She is there, in the middle on the ground and she is so still that for a moment I think she has died and is about to Return. Bile and terror rise in my throat but are trapped. I feel the need to scream but I am utterly silent with my mouth open and my teeth bared.

My legs tangle in my skirts and I claw at the ground and am almost to the fence when I hear the Guardian behind me. I look back at him, pleading with him. "She is still alive," I tell him, because I just know that she is. He looks over his shoulder into the mist and, seeing that we are alone, he nods as if giving me permission and I lace my fingers around the thin rusted metal of the fence, feeling its sharp cold edges bite into my palms.

"The ocean," my mother murmurs. Sharp as a crack she whips her head around and I see that her eyes are wide and unfocused but lucid. She crawls toward me until our hands are linked together through the fence.

"The ocean, Mary, the ocean!" She is speaking so urgently now, her mouth moving rapidly. I am afraid that the Guardian will think she is crazy and has turned and that he will kill me but I can't pull my hands back because my mother's grip is too tight.

"So beautiful, the ocean." She repeats the words over and over again, her eyes becoming bright with unshed tears. "The water, the waves, the sand, the salt!" She is shaking the fence now and it causes undulations to ripple outward to either side, the metal swaying back and forth. I am amazed that she has this strength; she has been dying for so many hours.

"It consumes me," she says, her voice only a whisper. She reaches one finger through the wire and strokes my wrist. "My little girl," she tells me. "Do not forget my little girl." Tears slip out of her eyes and I hear the Guardian shout behind me and then my mother slumps to the ground, her fingers slipping away from mine.



In the moment between my mother's death and her Return, I stop believing in God.



The Guardian quickly grabs the end of the rope tied to my mother's left ankle as I scoot away from the fence. It is anchored over a system of pulleys lashed to branches high above and he heaves against it, the other end of the rope dragging my mother to the edge of her pen. The Guardian pulls a lever, a gate rises and her lifeless body slides into the Forest of Hands and Teeth. He cuts the rope, reverses the lever and the gates grind shut. For a heartbeat the world is silent around us, the sound of our own breathing muffled by the mist.

His duty complete, my mother's body given fully over to the Unconsecrated, the Guardian places a hand on my shoulder. Whether it is to comfort me or to hold me back does not matter. I imagine that I can feel his pulse through his fingertips. We are both so alive in that moment surrounded by so much death.

I can't decide if I want to watch my mother Return. If I can bear to see it. But I can't help but wonder what that moment is like. Is there a spark or an instant where she will remember me? Where she will remember her old life from before?

My mother used to tell me stories about how, long before the Return, the living used to wonder what happened after death. She said that whole religions were born and evolved around this one simple uncertainty.

Now that we know what happens after death, a new question has risen up to take the place of the old: why?

Suddenly, regret screams through me. I wonder if I should have dressed her in something different. If I should have put her in

warmer clothes or better shoes. If I should have pinned a note to the inside of her dress telling her that I love her. I wonder how long it will take for her to find my father and if she will recognize him. An image of the two of them holding hands at the fence line flits across my mind.

She is on her feet before I even know what's happening. She stares at me and for a moment all I can think is Mother and then she opens her mouth and my world shatters with her screams that fall off into moans as her vocal cords give way.

I cannot bear it and I start to move toward her, struggling under the weight of the Guardian's hand, but then I hear my name being called out in warning.

It is Jed. I didn't hear him approach but I can smell him now, the scent of woods and work and the smoke from our house. I don't bother to look at him, I just know that he is behind me and I sag back against him. He's home from his rotation on the fence line just in time to see our mother die and Return.

Later, the Guardian in him will question me and chastise me. Because I allowed my mother to make this choice and because I failed both him and her by dallying near the stream. Because I was too selfish to understand that my mother would go to the Forest without me and because I was not there to stop her.

But for now he is my brother and both our parents are gone and we are all we have left.

▼ III ▼

The first thing the Sisters do when Jed walks me back to the Cathedral is strip off my clothes and half-drown me in the sacred well. I wait to see if the water will burn off my flesh now that I no longer believe in God but nothing happens as the Sisters chant prayers and scrub my body. Through the water and past the arms of the Sisters, I see Jed being escorted from the Cathedral.

They pull me out of the holy water, my eyes stinging and my long hair like a spiderweb over my face so that I sputter and cough. "You will stay here within the Cathedral walls," the Sisters tell me. "We cannot have you going back to the fence line."

I understand this and I know that no amount of protesting will change their minds. But still, it irritates me that they think I would be so stupid as to go after my mother.

She no longer exists.

A blanket finds its way to my shoulders and I am led along a hallway I never noticed before, down a set of stairs and into a room with stone walls, a stone floor, a cot and a window that looks out past the graveyard toward the Forest. I want to laugh; if they are so afraid of my doing something drastic after facing my mother's death why do they place me in a room that overlooks the site where she turned? I can clearly see the series of gates through which she was dragged and I can even see a few Unconsecrated pressing against the fence line. Their moans slip lightly through the open window.

"Why can't I go home?" I ask as they close the door behind me.

The oldest, Sister Tabitha, pauses on the threshold. "It is better that you stay here."

“But what about my brother?” I cross my arms over my chest, cupping my elbows in my hands and folding in on myself.

She doesn’t answer. Then the door closes and I can hear the lock slide into place. I am alone with the sound of the Unconsecrated.

For a while I watch the sun travel across the sky. I notice that in the heat of the day the Unconsecrated abandon their post at the fence and wander back into the woods, shuffling away to down themselves in a sort of eternal hibernation that is only broken when they sense human flesh nearby.

I watch the fences for a glimpse of my mother that never comes.



There is no moon that night and I watch as stars fill the dark emptiness. Clouds creep in heavy and low so that there is nothing more to see outside and so I move to my cot and sit down, not bothering to light the candle placed on a small table by the door.

I want to sleep, I want dreams to pull me from this world and make me forget. To stop the memories from swirling around me. To put an end to this ache that consumes me.

A thin sliver of light infiltrates the bottom sill of the wooden door and I can just see the walls surrounding me. A cricket chirrups somewhere. I wrap the blanket around my shoulders and over my head and pull my knees up to my chest and silently heave for my mother.



The next day my eyes burn from lack of sleep. I trace the sun as it creeps across my floor, paying attention to nothing else but the light slipping slowly away from me. Someone brings in food and a jug of water but I don’t bother with either. Later, Sister Tabitha comes and says she is there to check on me but I know she’s there to judge my

mental state. To see if I have broken under the weight of my parents' deaths. The day continues like this: food, Sister Tabitha, water, Sister Tabitha and so on and so on.

A small part of me craves to rebel, to break free of this room. To run and grieve with my brother. But I am too exhausted, my body unwilling to move. Here I'm warm and fed and alone and don't have to answer anyone's accusing questions or stares. I don't have to explain why my mother was alone, why I was not with her.

Instead, I can spend the between time remembering. I lie on the floor with my eyes closed and body limp, trying to feel my mother's hands in my hair as I repeat the stories she used to tell me over and over again in my mind. I refuse to forget any details and I am terrified that I already have. I go over each story again—seemingly impossible stories about oceans and buildings that soared into the heavens and men who touched the moon. I want them to be ingrained in my head, to become a part of me that I cannot lose as I have lost my parents.

My brother doesn't visit and I hear no news of him from the Sisters. I wonder if he thinks of me. I want to be angry at him, to revel in any emotion other than shock and pain, but I understand that this is the way he grieves.

And finally, after a week has passed, Sister Tabitha comes to me and hands me a black tunic to change into and says that I am free to go and that I should thank God for the strength He has given me to move forward with my life.

I nod, unwilling to tell her now that God does not enter into it, and walk slowly back to my family's house where just weeks before we lived together happy and safe. My brother's house now that my mother has passed away and he, as the only son, has inherited. I can't help but ache inside as I approach, knowing my mother is not there. Will never be there. I think about all of the memories trapped in the

rough log walls, all of the warmth and laughter and dreams.

I feel as if I can almost see these things leaking out, slipping away into the sunlight. As if the house is cleansing itself of our history. Forgetting my mother and her stories and our childhood. Without thinking, I place a hand against the wall to the right of the door. As with every building in our village there is a line of Scripture there, carved into the wood by the Sisterhood. It is our habit and duty to press a hand against these words every time we cross a threshold, to remind us of God and His words.

I wait for them to calm me, to infuse me with light and grace. But it does not come, does not fill the hollow ache inside me. I wonder if I will ever feel whole again now that I no longer believe in God.

The wood under my fingertips is smooth from generations of villagers pressing their hands in this one spot. This one spot my mother will never touch again.

As if he knew I would be coming today my brother opens the door, causing me to yank my hand from the Scripture verse. Seeing him fills me with memories and fresh pain. He doesn't allow me inside and I wonder if Beth can overhear us talking.

I am surprised at my skittishness around my own brother. Once, he and I were friends and shared everything. But he was always my father's son and I my mother's daughter. Losing our father to the Unconsecrated was too much for him and I have watched him harden over the past months. He has thrown himself into his role as Guardian, rapidly rising several notches in their ranks. I twist my fingers together in front of me as I search his face for the tenderness I once knew but all I find is sharp edges.

"Why did you let her go?" he asks me. He holds a hand over his eyes to block out the sun coming over my shoulder, and his stance reminds me of the way our mother would stand and scan the Forest looking for our father.

I have expected this question and yet I still don't know what he wants to hear. "It was her choice," I tell him.

He spits on the ground near my feet and some of the spit catches in the short black hairs on his chin. "It was not her choice." His voice is strained and even and I know that he would prefer to be yelling but does not want to cause a scene in the village. "She was insane, she was sick."

I can feel his rage and pain wash over me and I want to take his emotions onto myself, to help him carry this burden. But my own feelings are too much, they swirl and overwhelm me such that I am helpless to comfort my brother.

"I couldn't kill her, Jed. I couldn't let them do that." I resist the urge to look down at my hands as I speak.

"What do you think throwing her to the Unconsecrated was, Mary?" He reaches out and grabs my shoulder so hard that his fingers dig in around the bone. "Don't you realize that I will have to kill her now? When I'm out on patrol, what do you think will happen if I see her? Do you think I can let her go on"—he waves his hand past me, past the fields and toward the fence line—"like that? That is not life. That is not natural. It is sick and horrid and evil and I can't believe you would do this to me. That you would make me be the one to kill our mother because you weren't strong enough to do it."

I see now that he wanted me to be the one to kill her so that he wouldn't have to make his own choice.

"I'm sorry, Jed," I say, because I don't know how else to make it right between us. He is a Guardian, one of the few whose only duty is to protect the village, to mend the fence line, to kill the Infected. I don't know how to force him to see that it was her choice and not mine. That in making that choice she must have known that it could come to her own son having to kill her later. I don't know how to

make him understand that sometimes love and devotion can overpower a person to the point where she wants to join her spouse in the Forest. Even if it means throwing everything else in life away.

I move forward to give him a hug but he keeps his arm stiff, his hand still on my shoulder so that I cannot come any closer.

“I am the man of the house now, Mary,” he tells me.

I try a smile, to remind him that he will always be my brother. “That doesn’t mean you can’t hug your own sister,” I tell him.

He doesn’t laugh as I hoped. “I hear you are to join the Sisterhood,” he says. His words hit me like a slap. I don’t know what I was expecting—anger, pain, regret, but not for him to turn me away. Not for him to cast me out and leave me to the Sisters before I’ve even had a chance to speak with him. To plead my case. This is why he didn’t come to me at the Cathedral—in his mind I already belonged to them, I was already a Sister.

A part of me always knew that it would come to this, that this scene was inevitable in our lives. Walking toward the house today I knew somehow that I would not even be allowed inside to gather my mother’s meager belongings. Jed would take it all.

“No one has spoken for you, Mary. No one has asked for you. No one will be courting you this winter.” His fingers still bite into my arm.

“But Harry,” I say, gesturing uselessly over my shoulder toward the hill that hides the stream where only a week ago Harry asked me to the Harvest Celebration. I struggle to remember if I ever answered him.

Jed begins to shake his head even before I can sort through the confused roar in my mind. I open my mouth but he cuts me off.

“He did not ask for you, Mary.”

I stare at him, feeling as if everything that I ever was is draining out of my body and leaving me. In my village an unmarried woman

has three choices. She may live with her family; a man may speak for her, court her through the winter and marry her in the spring ceremonies; or she may join the Sisterhood. Our village has been isolated since soon after the Return and while we have grown strong and populous over the years, it is still imperative that every healthy young man and woman wed and breed if possible.

The sickness that cut through my generation only made new children more important. And with so few of us of marrying age the past few seasons it is what I have grown up expecting. That one day this fall someone like Harry would ask for me. Or that one of the other boys my age would take an interest. I have hoped that one day I could claim such a love for a man as my mother, who was willing to go into the Forest of Hands and Teeth after her Unconsecrated husband.

Of course, Jed could choose to take me in and wait to see if someone speaks for me next year, give the rest of the families in town some time to get over the fact that both of my parents are now Unconsecrated. That our family has been touched by unending death. But it's clear that this is a choice he is unwilling to make.

"There is still time," I say. I can hear the hint of desperation in my voice, my need for him to take me in now that we are all that is left.

"You belong with the Sisters," he says, his voice devoid of emotion. "Good luck." The pressure of his fingers on my arms pushes me away from the entrance to his home. Looking into his eyes, I think he actually does wish me luck.

"And Beth?" I ask, seeking any excuse to remain with my brother for a moment longer. Hoping to rekindle the friendship we shared just a few weeks ago, have shared our entire lives.

I watch as muscles ripple along his jaw, as his hand clenches on the doorframe. "She lost the child," he says. He steps back into the house, the darkness inside cloaking his expression. "It was a boy," he adds as he swings the door shut.

I step forward, ready to push my way in. But then I hear the lock click and I pause, my hand reaching at the air. I want to grab him and hold him and mourn with him. I would have been an aunt, I think as I let my hand press against the warmth of the wooden door. I want to yell at Jed that I hurt too and that I am sorry and that I need him.

But then I realize that he has his new family to mourn with. That somehow I'm no longer enough to comfort him. I'm only a reminder of our parents' deaths. I flex my fingers against the door, my nails digging into the wood, realizing just how fully alone I am.

Struggling to keep my throat from burning, I let my hand drop and turn my back on the only home I have ever known. I look out at the familiar houses across the way. The vibrant summer gardens crumbling into dirt patches where three little girls hold hands and spin in circles, chanting out a rhyme. I know I should return to the Cathedral but I also know that once I join the Sisters my life will revolve around studying the Scripture and I will have little time for my own whims and desires. And so instead, I walk away from the cluster of small houses and skirt the edges of the fields, now harvested and prepared for winter, and I begin to climb the hill that hovers at the sunrise edge of our village.

As a child growing up, I learned in my lessons from the Sisters that just before the Return They—who They were is long forgotten—knew what was coming. They knew that something had gone horribly wrong and that it was only a matter of time before the Unconsecrated swarmed everywhere.

They still thought They could contain it. And so, even as the Unconsecrated infected the living and the pressure of the Return began to build, They were busy constructing fences. Infinitely long fences. Whether the fences were to keep the Unconsecrated out or the living in we no longer know. But the end result was our village, an enclave of hundreds of survivors in the middle of a vast Forest of Unconsecrated.

There are various theories as to how our village came into existence in the middle of this Forest. The Cathedral and some of the other buildings clearly predate the Return and some people suggest that They carved this place out as a sanctuary. Others claim that we are a chosen people and that our ancestors were the best of their time and were sent here to survive. Who we are and why we are here has been lost to history, lost because our ancestors were too busy trying to survive to remember and pass on what they knew. What little remnants we once had—like my mother's picture of my many-greats-grandmother standing in the ocean—were destroyed in the fire when I was a child.

We know of nothing beyond our village except the Forest, and nothing beyond the Forest at all.

But at least They were smart enough to leave a stockpile of fencing material behind after They finished creating our little world. And so, after the village established itself, it began to beat back the Forest and expand. Little by little my ancestors hacked away pieces of the Forest and claimed it as their own, pushing the fence line until there was nothing left to build with.

This hill was part of the last big push, the last big enclosure. Our ancestors felt it was important to have the high ground so that we could keep watch over the Forest. For a while there was a lookout tower at the top of the hill but now it has fallen into disrepair and is never used. But that doesn't stop me from climbing it so that for one last time before I go to the Sisters, I am at the highest point in our gated existence.

I look out at the world below. To my right the fields stretch into the distance, dotted here and there with cows and sheep that have been turned out from the barns clustered at the farthest edge of the fence line. It doesn't matter if they stray toward the Forest—like all animals except humans, they cannot be infected by the Unconsecrated.

To my left is the village itself. From up here the houses are even smaller, the Cathedral a hulking shape that dominates the sunset boundary, its graveyard all that stands between the large stone building and the fences lining the Forest. From here I can see the way the Cathedral has grown awkwardly, wings sprouting off the central sanctuary at strange angles.

At the foot of the hill, on the side opposite the village, is a gate that leads to a path stretching deep into the Forest, a scar that runs through the trees. Though that path, and the mirror path that leads from the Cathedral side of the village, are also lined with fences, they are both forbidden by the Sisters and Guardians.

The paths are useless strips of land covered in brambles, bushes and weeds. The gates blocking them have remained shut my entire life.

No one remembers where the paths go. Some say they are there as escape routes, others say they are there so that we can travel deep into the Forest for wood. We only know that one points to the rising sun and the other to the setting sun. I am sure our ancestors knew where the paths led, but, just like almost everything else about the world before the Return, that knowledge has been lost.

We are our own memory-keepers and we have failed ourselves. It is like that game we played in school as children. Sitting in a circle, one student whispers a phrase into another student's ear and the phrase is passed around until the last student in the circle repeats what she hears, only to find out it is nothing like what it is supposed to be.

That is our life now.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



© Darren Cassese

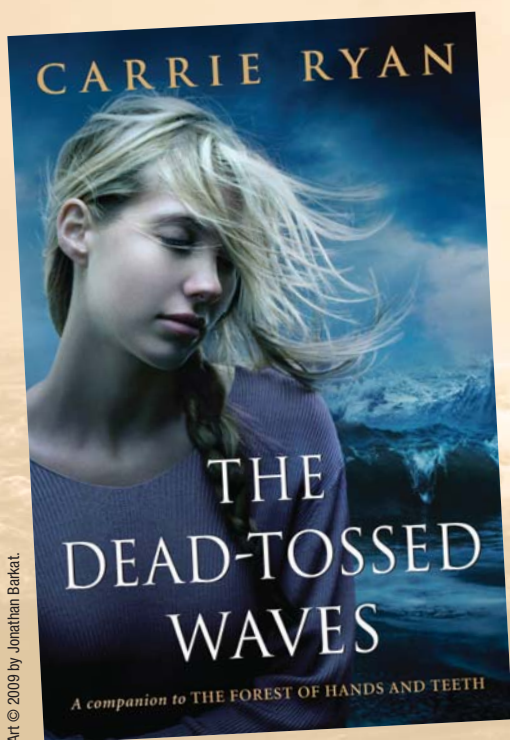
CARRIE RYAN was born and raised in Greenville, South Carolina and is a graduate of Williams College and Duke University Law School. She lives with her fiancé and two fat cats in Charlotte, North Carolina. You can visit Carrie at CarrieRyan.com.

COMING MARCH 9, 2010!

LOVE IS A THREAT THE BARRIER CANNOT HOLD.



A companion novel to
THE FOREST OF HANDS AND TEETH



Can love survive
in a world filled
with so much
death?

Art © 2009 by Jonathan Barkat



SupernaturalRomanceBooks.com

CARRIE RYAN RECOMMENDS!

Like THE FOREST OF HANDS AND TEETH?



Art © 2009 by Chad Michael Ward

Check out
**shadowed
SUMMER,**
the debut novel
by Sandra
Mitchell.

Years ago, before Iris was born, a teenager named
Elijah disappeared. All that remains of him
are whispers. Until this summer.

What really happened to him? And why, of all
people, has he chosen to haunt Iris?



For more details, visit www.randomhouse.com/teens

Published by Delacorte Press
an imprint of Random House Children's Books
a division of Random House, Inc.
New York

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2009 by Carrie Ryan
All rights reserved.

Delacorte Press and colophon are registered trademarks of Random House, Inc.

www.randomhouse.com/teens

Educators and librarians, for a variety of teaching tools,
visit us at www.randomhouse.com/teachers

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ryan, Carrie.

The Forest of Hands and Teeth / Carrie Ryan. — 1st ed.

p. cm.

Summary: Through twists and turns of fate, orphaned Mary seeks knowledge of life, love, and especially what lies beyond her walled village and the surrounding forest, where dwell the Unconsecrated, aggressive flesh-eating people who were once dead.

ISBN 978-0-385-73681-7 (hc) — ISBN 978-0-385-90631-9 (glb)

[1. Horror stories. 2. Fantasy.] I. Title.

PZ7.R9478For 2009 [Fic]—dc22 2008006494

The text of this book is set in 11.5-point Minion.

Book design by Vikki Sheatsley

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

First Edition

FREE SAMPLE COPY—NOT FOR SALE